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Résumé de l'article

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Précis

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"Women in Between": Indian Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada

In attempting to analyse the life of the Indian woman in fur trade society in Western Canada, especially from her own point of view, one is immediately confronted by a challenging historiographical problem. Can the Indian woman's perspective be constructed from historical sources that were almost exclusively written by European men? Coming from a non-literate society, no Indian women have left us, for example, their views on the fur trade or their reasons for becoming traders' wives.[1] Yet if one amasses the sources available for fur trade social history, such as contemporary narratives, journals, correspondence and wills, a surprisingly rich store of information on Indian women emerges. One must, of course, be wary of the traders' cultural and sexual bias, but then even modern anthropologists have difficulty maintaining complete objectivity. Furthermore, the fur traders had the advantage of knowing Indian women intimately — these women became their wives, the mothers of their children. Narratives such as that of Andrew Graham in the late eighteenth century and David Thompson in the nineteenth, both of whom had native wives, comment perceptively on the implications of Indian-white social contact.[2] The key to constructing the Indian woman's perspective must lie in the kinds of questions applied to the data;[3] regrettably the picture will not be complete, but it is hoped that a careful reading of the traders' observations can result in a useful and illuminating account of the Indian woman's life in fur trade society.

The fur trade was based on the complex interaction between two different racial groups. On the one hand are the various Indian tribes, most importantly the Ojibway, the Cree and the Chipewyan. These Indians may be designated the "host" group in that they remain within their traditional environment. On the other hand are the European traders, the "visiting" group, who enter the Northwest by both the Hudson's Bay and St. Lawrence-Great Lakes routes. They are significantly different from the Indians in that they constitute only a small, all-male fragment of their own society. For a variety of factors to be discussed, this created a unique situation for the Indian women. They became the "women in between" two groups of males. Because of their sex, Indian women were able to become an integral part of fur trade society in a sense that Indian men never could. As country wives[4] of the traders, Indian women lived substantially different lives when they moved within the forts. Even within the tribes, women who acted as allies of the whites can also be observed; certain circumstances permit-

ted individual women to gain positions of influence and act as "social brokers" between the two groups.

It is a major contention of this study that Indian women themselves were active agents in the development of Indian-white relations.[5] A major concern then must be to determine what motivated their actions. Some themes to be discussed are the extent to which the Indian woman was able to utilize her position as "woman in between" to increase her influence and status, and the extent to which the Indian woman valued the economic advantage brought by the traders. It must be emphasized, however, that Indian-white relations were by no means static during the fur trade period.[6] After assessing the positive and negative aspects of the Indian woman's life in fur trade society, the paper will conclude by discussing the reasons for the demise of her position.

I

Miscegenation was the basic social fact of the western Canadian fur trade. That this was so indicates active cooperation on both sides. From the male perspective, both white and Indian, the formation of marital alliances between Indian women and the traders had its advantages. The European traders had both social and economic reasons for taking Indian mates. Not only did they fill the sexual void created by the absence of white women,[7] but they performed such valuable economic tasks as making moccasins and netting snowshoes that they became an integral if unofficial part of the fur trade work force.[8] The traders also realized that these alliances were useful in cementing trade ties; officers in both the Hudson's Bay and North West companies often married daughters of trading captains or chiefs.[9] From the Indian point of view, the marital alliance created a reciprocal social bond which served to consolidate his economic relationship with the trader. The exchange of women was common in Indian society where it was viewed as "a reciprocal alliance and series of good offices . . . between the friends of both parties; each is ready to assist and protect the other."[10] It was not loose morality or even hospitality which prompted the Indians to be so generous with their offers of women. This was their way of drawing the traders into their kinship circle, and in return for giving the traders sexual and domestic rights to their women, the Indians expected equitable privileges such as free access to the posts and provisions.[11] It is evident that the traders often did not understand the Indian concept of these alliances and a flagrant violation of Indian sensibilities could lead to retaliation such as the Henley House massacre in 1755.[12]

But what of the women themselves? Were they just pawns in this exchange, passive, exploited victims? Fur trade sources do not support this view; there are numerous examples of Indian women actively seeking to become connected with the traders. According to an early Nor'Wester, Cree women considered it an honour to be selected as wives by the voyageurs, and any husband who refused to lend his wife would be subject to the general condemnation of the women.[13]

Alexander Ross observed that Chinook women on the Pacific coast showed a preference for living with a white man. If deserted by one husband, they would return to their tribe in a state of widowhood to await the opportunity of marrying another fur trader.[14] Nor'Wester Daniel Harmon voiced the widely-held opinion that most of the Indian women were "better pleased to remain with the White People than with their own Relations", while his contemporary George Nelson affirmed "some too would even desert to live with the white".[15] Although Alexander Henry the Younger may have exaggerated his difficulties in fending off young Indian women, his personal experiences underline the fact that the women often took the initiative. On one occasion when travelling with his brigade in the summer of 1800, Henry was confronted in his tent by a handsome woman, dressed in her best finery, who told him boldly that she had come to live with him as she did not care for her husband or any other Indian. But Henry, anxious to avoid this entanglement partly because it was not sanctioned by the husband whom he knew to be insatiably jealous, forced the woman to return to her Indian partner.[16] A year or so later in the lower Red River district, the daughter of an Ojibway chief had more luck. Henry returned from New Year's festivities to find that "Liard's daughter" had taken possession of his room and the devil could not have got her out".[17] This time, having become more acculturated to fur trade life, Henry acquiesced and "Liard's daughter" became his country wife. The trader, however, resisted his father-in-law's argument that he should also take his second daughter because all great men should have a plurality of wives.[18]

The fur traders also comment extensively on the assistance and loyalty of Indian women who remained within the tribes. An outstanding example is the young Chipewyan Thanadelthur, known to the traders as the "Slave Woman".[19] In the early eighteenth century after being captured by the Cree, Thanadelthur managed to escape to York Factory. Her knowledge of Chipewyan made her valuable to the traders, and in 1715-16, she led an H.B.C. expedition to establish peace between the Cree and the Chipewyan, a necessary prelude to the founding of Fort Churchill. Governor James Knight's journals give us a vivid picture of this woman, of whom he declared: "She was one of a Very high Spirit and of the Firmest Resolution that ever I see any Body in my Days."[20]

Post journals contain numerous references to Indian women warning the traders of impending treachery. In 1797, Charles Chaboillez, having been warned by an old woman that the Indians intended to pillage his post, was able to nip this intrigue in the bud.[21] George Nelson and one of his men only escaped an attack by some Indians in 1805 by being "clandestinely assisted by the women".[22] It appears that women were particularly instrumental in saving the lives of the whites among the turbulent tribes of the Lower Columbia.[23] One of the traders' most notable allies was the well-connected Chinook princess known as Lady Calpo, the wife of a Clatsop chief. In 1814, she helped restore peaceful relations after the Nor'Westers had suffered a raid on their canoes by giving them important information about Indian custom in settling disputes. Handsome rewards cemented her attachment to the traders with the result that Lady

Calpo reputedly saved Fort George from several attacks by warning of the hostile plans of the Indians.[24]

The reasons for the Indian women's action are hinted at in the traders' observations. It was the generally-held opinion of the traders that the status of women in Indian society was deplorably low. As Nor'Wester Gabriel Franchère summed it up:

> Some Indian tribes think that women have no souls, but die altogether like the brutes; others assign them a different paradise from that of men, which indeed they might have reason to prefer . . . unless their relative condition were to be ameliorated in the next world.[25]

Whether as "social brokers" or as wives, Indian women attempted to manipulate their position as "women in between" to increase their influence and status. Certainly women such as Thanadelthur and Lady Calpo were able to work themselves into positions of real power. It is rather paradoxical that in Thanadelthur's case it was her escape from captivity that brought her into contact with the traders in the first place; if she had not been a woman, she would never have been carried off by the Cree as a prize of war. Once inside the H.B.C. fort, she was able to use her position as the only Chipewyan to advantage by acting as guide and consultant to the Governor. The protection and regard she was given by the whites enabled Thanadelthur to dictate to Indian men, both Cree and Chipewyan, in a manner they would not previously have tolerated. Anxious to promote the traders' interests, she assaulted an old Chipewyan on one occasion when he attempted to trade less than prime furs; she "ketcht him by the nose Push'd him backwards & call'd him fool and told him if they brought any but Such as they ware directed they would not be traded."[26] Thanadelthur did take a Chipewyan husband but was quite prepared to leave him if he would not accompany her on the arduous second journey she was planning to undertake for the Governor.[27] It is possible that the role played by Thanadelthur and subsequent "slave women" in establishing trade relations with the whites may have enhanced the status of Chipewyan women. Nearly a century later, Alexander Mackenzie noted that, in spite of their burdensome existence, Chipewyan women possessed "a very considerable influence in the traffic with Europeans."[28]

Lady Calpo retained a position of influence for a long time. When Governor Simpson visited Fort George in 1824, he found she had to be treated with respect because she was "the best News Monger in the Parish"; from her he learned "More of the Scandal, Secrets and politics both of the out & inside of the Fort than from Any other source."[29] Significantly, Lady Calpo endeavoured to further improve her rank by arranging a marriage alliance between the Governor and her carefully-raised daughter. Although Simpson declared he wished "to keep clear of the Daughter", he succumbed in order "to continue on good terms with the Mother."[30] Many years later, a friend visiting the Columbia wrote to Simpson that Lady Calpo that " 'fast friend' of the Whites" was still thriving.[31]

As wives of the traders, Indian women could also manoeuver themselves into positions of influence. In fact, a somewhat perturbed discussion emerges in fur trade literature over the excessive influence some Indian women exerted over their fur trader husbands. The young N.W.C. clerk George Nelson appears to have spent long hours contemplating the insoluable perplexities of womankind. Nelson claimed that initially Cree women when married to whites were incredibly attentive and submissive, but this did not last long. Once they had gained a little footing, they knew well "how to take advantage & what use they ought to make of it."[32] On one of his first trips into the interior, Nelson was considerably annoyed by the shenanigans of the Indian wife of Brunet, one of his voyageurs. A jealous, headstrong woman, she completely dominated her husband by a mixture of "caresses, promises & menaces". Not only did this woman render her husband a most unreliable servant, but Nelson also caught her helping herself to the Company's rum. Brunet's wife, Nelson fumed, was as great "a vixen & hussy" as the tinsmith's wife at the market place in Montreal: "I now began to think that women were women not only in civilized countries but elsewhere also."[33]

Another fur trader observed a paradoxical situation among the Chipewyan women. In their own society, they seemed condemned to a most servile existence, but upon becoming wives of the French-Canadian voyageurs, they assumed "an importance to themselves and instead of serving as formerly they exact submission from the descendants of the Gauls."[34] One of the most remarkable examples of a Chipewyan wife rising to prominence was the case of Madam Lamallice, the wife of the brigade guide at the H.B.C. post on Lake Athabasca. During the difficult winter of 1821-21, Madam Lamallice was accorded a favoured position because she was the post's only interpreter and possessed considerable influence with the Indians.[35] George Simpson, then experiencing his first winter in the Indian Country, felt obliged to give in to her demands for extra rations and preferred treatment in order to prevent her defection. He had observed that the Nor'Westers' strong position was partly due to the fact that ". . . their Women are faithful to their cause and good Interpreters whereas we have but one in the Fort that can talk Chipewyan."[36] Madam Lamallice exploited her position to such an extent that she even defied fort regulations by carrying on a private trade in provisions.[37] A few years later on a trip to the Columbia, Governor Simpson was annoyed to discover that Chinook women when married to the whites often gained such an ascendancy "that they give law to their Lords".[38] In fact, he expressed general concern about the influence of these "petticoat politicians" whose demands were "more injurious to the Companys interests that I am well able to describe."[39] The Governor deplored Chief Factor James Bird's management of Red River in the early 1820's because of his habit of discussing every matter "however trifling or important" with "his Copper Cold. Mate", who then spread the news freely around the colony.[40] Too many of his officers, Simpson declared, tended to sacrifice business for private interests. Particular expense and delay were occasioned in providing transport for families. Simpson never forgave Chief Factor John Clarke for abandoning some of the goods destined for Athabasca in 1820 to make a light canoe for his native wife and her servant.[41]

It is likely that Simpson's single-minded concern for business efficiency caused him to exaggerate the extent of the Indian women's influence. Nevertheless, they do seem to have attempted to take advantage of their unique position as women "in between" two groups of men. This fact is supported by the traders' observation that the choice of a husband, Indian or white, gave the Indian woman leverage to improve her lot. Now she could threaten to desert to the whites or vice-versa if she felt she were not being well-treated:

> She has always enough of policy to insinuate how well off she was while living with the white people and in like manner when with the latter she drops some hints to the same purpose.[42]

Although Chipewyan women who had lived with the voyageurs had to resume their former domestic tasks when they returned to their own people, they reputedly evinced a greater spirit of independence.[43] Considerable prestige accrued to Chinook women who had lived with the traders; upon rejoining the tribes, they remained "very friendly" to the whites and "never fail to influence their connections to the same effect."[44]

From the Indian woman's point of view, material advantage was closely tied to the question of improved influence or status. The women within the tribes had a vested interest in promoting cordial relations with the whites. While George Nelson mused that it was a universal maternal instinct which prompted the women to try to prevent clashes between Indian and white,[45] they were more likely motivated by practical, economic considerations. If the traders were driven from the country, the Indian woman would lose the source of European goods, which had revolutionized her life just as much if not more than that of the Indian man. It was much easier to boil water in a metal kettle than to have to laboriously heat it by means of dropping hot stones into a bark container. Cotton and woolen goods saved long hours of tanning hides. "Show them an awl or a strong needle," declared David Thompson, "and they will gladly give the finest Beaver or Wolf skin they have to purchase it."[46]

Furthermore, it can be argued that the tendency of the Indians to regard the fur trade post as a kind of welfare centre was of more relevance to the women than to the men. In times of scarcity, which were not infrequent in Indian society, the women were usually the first to suffer.[47] Whereas before they would often have perished, many now sought relief at the companies' posts. To cite but one of many examples: at Albany during the winter of 1706, Governor Beale gave shelter to three starving Cree women whose husband had sent them away as he could only provide for his two children.[48] The post was also a source of medical aid and succour. The story is told of a young Carrier woman in New Caledonia, who having been severely beaten by her husband managed to struggle to the nearest N.W.C. post. Being nearly starved, she was slowly nursed back to health and allowed to remain at the post when it became apparent that her relatives had abandoned her.[49] The desire for European goods, coupled with the assistance to be found at the fur trade posts, helps to explain why Indian women often became devoted allies of the traders.

In becoming the actual wife of a fur trader, the Indian woman was offered even greater relief from the burdens of her traditional existence. In fact, marriage to a trader offered an alternative lifestyle. The fur traders themselves had no doubt that an Indian woman was much better off with a white man. The literature presents a dreary recital of their abhorrence of the degraded, slave-like position of the Indian woman. The life of a Cree woman, declared Alexander Mackenzie, was "an uninterrupted success of toil and pain."[50] Nor'Wester Duncan McGillivray decided that the rather singular lack of affection evinced by Plains Indian women for their mates arose from the barbarous treatment the women received.[51] Although David Thompson found the Chipewyan a good people in many ways, he considered their attitudes toward women a disgrace; he had known Chipewyan women to kill female infants as "an act of kindness" to spare them the hardships they would have to face.[52]

The extent to which the fur traders' observations represent an accurate reflection of the actual status of Indian women in their own societies presents a complex dilemma which requires deeper investigation. The cultural and class biases of the traders are obvious. Their horror at the toilsome burdens imposed upon Indian women stems from their narrow, chivalrous view of women as the "frail, weaker sex". This is scarcely an appropriate description of Indian women, particularly the Chipewyan who were acknowledged to be twice as strong as their male counterparts.[53] Furthermore, while the sharp sexual division of labour inflicted a burdensome role upon the women, their duties were essential and the women possessed considerable autonomy within their own sphere.[54] Some traders did think it curious that the women seemed to possess a degree of influence in spite of their degraded situation; indeed, some of the bolder ones occasionally succeeded in making themselves quite independent and "wore the breeches".[55]

A possible way of explaining the discrepancy between the women's perceived and actual status is suggested in a recent anthropological study of the Mundurucu of Amazonian Brazil. In this society, the authors discovered that while the official (male) ideology relegates women to an inferior, subservient position, in the reality of daily life, the women are able to assume considerable autonomy and influence.[56] Most significantly, however, Mundurucú women, in order to alleviate their onerous domestic duties, have actively championed the erosion of traditional village life and the concomitant blurring of economic sex roles which have come with the introduction of the rubber trade. According to the authors, the Mundurucú woman "has seen another way of life, and she has opted for it."[57]

This statement could well be applied to the Indian woman who was attracted to the easier life of the fur trade post. In the first place, she now became involved in a much more sedentary routine. With a stationary home, the Indian woman was no longer required to act as a beast of burden, hauling or carrying the accouterments of camp from place to place. The traders often expressed astonishment and pity at the heavy loads which Indian women were obliged to transport.[58] In

fur trade society, the unenviable role of carrier was assumed by the voyageur. The male servants at the fort were now responsible for providing firewood and water, although the women might help. In contrast to Indian practice, the women of the fort were not sent to fetch home the produce of the hunt.[59] The wife of an officer, benefitting from her husband's rank, enjoyed a privileged status. She herself was carried in and out of the canoe[60] and could expect to have all her baggage portaged by a voyageur. At Fond du Lac in 1804 when the wife of N.W.C. *bourgeois* John Sayer decided to go on a sugar-making expedition, four men went with her to carry her baggage and provisions and later returned to fetch home her things.[61]

While the Indian woman performed a variety of valuable economic tasks around the post, her domestic duties were relatively lighter than they had traditionally been. Now her energies were concentrated on making moccasins and snowshoes. As one Nor'Wester declared, with the whites, Indian women could lead "a comparatively easy and free life" in contrast to the "servile slavish mode" of their own.[62] The prospect of superior comforts reputedly motivated some Spokan women to marry voyageurs.[63] The ready supply of both finery and trinkets which *bourgeois* and voyageurs were seen to lavish on their women may also have had an appeal.[64] Rival traders noted that luxury items such as lace, ribbons, rings and vermilion, which "greatly gain the Love of the Women", were important in attracting the Indians to trade.[65] The private orders placed by H.B.C. officers and servants in the 1790's and later include a wide range of cloth goods, shawls, gartering, earrings and brooches for the women.[66] When taken by a trader *à la façon du pays*, it became common for an Indian woman to go through a ritual performed by the other women of the fort; she was scoured of grease and paint and exchanged her native garments for those of a more civilized fashion. At the N.W.C. posts, wives were clothed in "Canadian fashion" which consisted of a shirt, short gown, petticoat and leggings.[67]

The traders further thought that Indian women benefitted by being freed from certain taboos and customs which they had to bear in Indian society. Among the Ojibway and other tribes, for example, the choicest part of an animal was always reserved for the men; death it was believed would come to any woman who dared to eat such sacred portions. The Nor'Westers paid little heed to such observances. As Duncan Cameron sarcastically wrote: "I have often seen several women living with the white men eat of those forbidden morsels without the least inconvenience."[68] The traders were also convinced that Indian women welcomed a monogamous as opposed to a polygamous state. Polygamy, several H.B.C. officers observed, often gave rise to jealous and sometimes murderous quarrels.[69] It is possible, however, that the traders' own cultural abhorrence of polygamy[70] made them exaggerate the women's antipathy toward it. As a practical scheme for the sharing of heavy domestic tasks, polygamy may in fact have been welcomed by the women.

II

Thus far the advantages which the fur trade brought to Indian women have been emphasized in order to help explain Indian women's reactions to it. It would be erroneous, however, to paint the life of an Indian wife as idyllic. In spite of the traders' belief in the superior benefits they offered, there is evidence that fur trade life had an adverse effect on Indian women. Certainly, a deterioration in her position over time can be detected.

First there is the paradox that the supposedly superior material culture of the fur trade had a deleterious effect on Indian women. It was as if, mused Reverend John West, the first Anglican missionary, "the habits of civilized life" exerted an injurious influence over their general constitutions.[71] Apart from being more exposed to European diseases, the Indian wives of traders suffered more in childbirth than they had in the primitive state. [72]Dr. John Richardson, who accompanied the Franklin Expedition of the 1820's noted, that not only did Indian women now have children more frequently and for longer periods, but that they were more susceptible to the disorders and diseases connected with pregnancy and childbirth.[73] It was not uncommon for fur traders' wives to give birth to from eight to twelve children, whereas four children were the average in Cree society.[74]

The reasons for this dramatic rise in the birth rate deserves further investigation, but several reasons can be advanced. As recent medical research had suggested, the less fatiguing lifestyle and more regular diet offered the Indian wife could have resulted in greater fecundity.[75] The daily ration for the women of the forts was four pounds of meat or fish (one half that for the men);[76] when Governor Simpson jokingly remarked that the whitefish diet at Fort Chipewyan seemed conducive to procreation he may have hit upon a medical truth.[77] Furthermore sexual activity in Indian society was circumscribed by a variety of taboos, and evidence suggests that Indian men regarded their European counterparts as very licentious.[78] Not only did Indian women now have sex more often, but the attitudes of European husbands also may have interfered with traditional modes of restricting family size. The practice of infanticide was, of course, condemned by the whites, but the Europeans may also have discouraged the traditional long nursing periods of from two to four years for each child.[79] In their view this custom resulted in the premature aging of the mothers,[80] but the fact that Indian children were born at intervals of approximately three years tends to support the recent theory that lactation depresses fertility.[81]

The cultural conflict resulting over the upbringing of the children must have caused the Indian women considerable anguish. An extreme example of the tragedy which could result related to the Chinook practice of head-flattening. In Chinook society, a flat forehead, achieved by strapping a board against the baby's head when in its cradle, was a mark of class; only slaves were not so distinguished. Thus it was only natural that a Chinook woman, though married to a fur trader, would desire to bind her baby's head, but white fathers found

this custom abhorrent. The insistence of some fathers that their infants' heads not be flattened resulted in the mothers murdering their babies rather than have them suffer the ignominy of looking like slaves. Gradually European preference prevailed. When Governor Simpson visited the Columbia in the early 1820's, he reported that Chinook wives were abiding by their husbands' wishes and no cases of infanticide had been reported for some years.[82]

In Indian society, children were the virtual "property" of the women who were responsible for their upbringing;[83] in fur trade society, Indian women could find themselves divested of these rights. While the traders acknowledged that Indian women were devoted and affectionate mothers, this did not prevent them from exercising patriarchal authority, particularly in sending young children to Britain or Canada so that they might receive a "civilized" education.[84] It must have been nearly impossible to explain the rationale for such a decision to the Indian mothers; their grief at being separated from their children was compounded by the fact that the children, who were especially vulnerable to respiratory diseases, often died.[85]

It is difficult to know if the general treatment accorded Indian women by European traders met with the women's acceptance. How much significance should be attached to the views of outside observers in the early 1800's who did not think the Indian woman's status had been much improved? Some of the officers of the Franklin Expedition felt the fur traders had been corrupted by Indian attitudes toward women; Indian wives were not treated with "the tenderness and attention due to every female" because the Indians would despise the traders for such unmanly action.[86] The first missionaries were even stronger in denouncing fur trade marital relations. John West considered the traders' treatment of their women disgraceful: "They do not admit them as their companions, nor do they allow them to eat at their tables, but degrade them *merely* as slaves to their arbitrary inclinations."[87] Such statements invite skepticism because of the writers' limited contact with fur trade society, and in the case of the missionaries because of their avowedly hostile view of fur trade customs. Furthermore, the above statements project a European ideal about the way women should be treated, which apart from being widely violated in their own society, would have had little relevance for Indian women. It is doubtful, for example, that the Indian women themselves would have viewed the fact that they did not come to table, a custom partly dictated by the quasi-military organization of the posts, as proof of their debased position.[88] The segregation of the sexes at meals was common in Indian society, but now, at least, the women did not have to suffice with the leftovers of the men.[89]

Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that Indian women were misused by the traders. In Indian society, women were accustomed to greater freedom of action with regard to marital relationships than the traders were prepared to accord them. It was quite within a woman's rights, for example, to institute a divorce if her marriage proved unsatisfactory.[90] In fur trade society, Indian women were more subject to arbitrary arrangements devised by the men. Upon

retiring from the Indian Country, it became customary for a trader to place his country wife and family with another, a practice known as "turning off". Although there was often little they could do about it, a few cases were cited of women who tried to resist. At a post in the Peace River district in 1798, the Indian wife of an *engagé*, who was growing tired of wintering *en derouine*, absolutely rejected her husband's attempt to pass her to the man who agreed to take his place.[91] At Fort Chipewyan in 1800, the estranged wife of the voyageur Morin foiled the attempt of his *bourgeois* to find her a temporary "protector"; she stoutly refused three different prospects.[92] Indian women also did not take kindly to the long separations which fur trade life imposed on them and their European mates. Although the Indian wife of Chief Factor Joseph Colen was to receive every attention during his absence in England in the late 1790's, Colen's successor could not dissuade her from taking an Indian lover and leaving York Factory.[93]

Indian wives seem to have been particularly victimized during the violent days of the trade war when rivals went so far as to debauch and intimidate each other's women. In 1819 at Pelican Lake, for example, H.B.C. servant Deshau took furs from a N.W.C. servant and raped his wife in retaliation for having had his own wife debauched by a Nor'Wester earlier in the season.[94] A notorious instance involved the Indian wife of H.B.C. servant Andrew Kirkness at Isle à la Crosse in 1810-11. In the late summer, this woman in a fit of pique had deserted her husband and sought refuge at the Nor'Westers' post. She soon regretted her action, however, for she was kept a virtual prisoner by the Canadians, and all efforts of the H.B.C. men to get her back failed. The upshot was that Kirkness himself deserted to the rival post, leaving the English in dire straits since he was their only fisherman. Kirkness was intimidated into remaining with the Nor'Westers until the spring with the threat that should he try to leave "every Canadian in the House would ravish his woman before his eyes." Eventually Kirkness was released, but only after his wife had been coerced into saying that she did not want to accompany him. As the H.B.C. party were evacuating their post, the woman tried to escape but was forcibly dragged back by the Nor'-Westers and ultimately became the "property" of an *engagé*.[95]

Such abusive tactics were also applied to the Indians. By the turn of the century, relations between the Indians and the Nor'Westers in particular showed a marked deterioration. In what seems to have been a classic case of "familiarity breeding contempt", the Nor'Westers now retained their mastery through coercion and brute force and frequently transgressed the bounds of Indian morality. An especially flagrant case was the Nor'Westers' exploitation of Chipewyan women at its posts in the Athabasca district. By the end of the eighteenth century, they had apparently built up a nefarious traffic in these women; the *bourgeois* did not scruple at seizing Chipewyan women by force, ostensibly in lieu of trade debts, and then selling them to the men for large sums.[96] The situation became so bad that the Chipewyan began leaving their women behind when they came to trade, and when Hudson's Bay traders appeared on Lake Athabasca in 1792, the Indians hoped to secure their support and drive out their

rivals. The English, however, were too weak to offer any effective check to the Nor'Westers who continued to assault both fathers and husbands if they tried to resist the seizure of their women. Since they were not powerful enough to mount an attack, the Chipewyan connived at the escape of their women during the summer months when most of the traders were away. Resentful of their treatment, many of the women welcomed the chance to slip back to their own people so that the summer master at Fort Chipewyan was almost solely preoccupied with keeping watch over the *engagés* women.[97] By 1800 at least one voyageur had been killed by irate Chipewyan, and the *bourgeois* contemplated offering a reward for the hunting down of "any d--nd rascal" who caused a Frenchman's woman to desert.[98]

The Indians appear to have become openly contemptuous of the white man and his so-called morality. A northern tribe called the Beaver Indians took a particularly strong stand. At first they had welcomed the Canadians but, having rapidly lost respect for them, now forbade any intercourse between their women and the traders.[100] Elsewhere individual hunters boycotted the traders owing to the mal-treatment of their women.[100] Sporadic reprisals became more frequent. Whereas Indian women had previously played a positive role as a liaison between Indian and white, they were now becoming an increasing source of friction between the two groups. Governor Simpson summed up the deteriorating situation:

> It is a lamentable fact that almost every difficulty we have had with Indians throughout the country may be traced to our interference with their Women or their intrigues with the Women of the Forts in short 9 murders out of 10 Committed on Whites by Indians have arisen through Women.[101]

Although there is little direct evidence available, it is possible that the Indian women themselves were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their treatment from the whites. In spite of the initiative which the women have been seen to exercise in forming and terminating relationships with the traders, there were undoubtedly times when they were the unwilling objects of a transaction between Indians and white men. Certainly not all Indian women looked upon the whites as desirable husbands, a view that was probably reinforced with experience. George Nelson did observe in 1811 that there were some Indian women who showed "an extraordinary predilection" for their own people and could not be prevailed upon to live with the traders.[102]

The increasing hostility of the Indians, coupled with the fact that in well-established areas marriage alliances were no longer a significant factor in trade relations, led to a decline in the practice of taking an Indian wife. In fact in 1806, the North West Company passed a ruling prohibiting any of its employees from taking a country wife from among the tribes.[103] One of the significant factors which changed the traders' attitudes toward Indian women, however, was that they were now no longer "women in between". By the turn of the century a sizeable group of mixed-blood women had emerged and for social and economic

reasons, fur traders preferred mixed-blood women as wives. In this way the Indian women lost their important place in fur trade society.

The introduction of the Indian woman's perspective on Indian-white relations serves to underscore the tremendous complexity of inter-cultural contact. It is argued that Indian women saw definite advantages to be gained from the fur trade, and in their unique position as "women in between", they endeavoured to manipulate the situation to improve their existence. That the limits of their influence were certainly circumscribed, and that the ultimate benefits brought by the traders were questionable does not negate the fact that the Indian women played a much more active and important role in the fur trade than has previously been acknowledged.

NOTES

[1] The lack of written Indian history is, of course, a general problem for the ethnohistorian. Indeed, all social scientists must rely heavily on the historical observations of the agents of white contact such as fur traders, explorers and missionaries. Little seems to have been done to determine if the oral tradition of the Indians is a viable source of information on Indian-white relations in the fur trade period.

[2] Glyndwr Williams, ed. *Andrew Graham's Observations on Hudson's Bay 1769-91* (London, Hudson's Bay Record Society, v. XXVII, 1969); Richard Glover, ed. *David Thompson's Narrative 1784-1812* (Toronto, Champlain Society, v. XL, 1962).

[3] A fascinating study which indicates how the application of a different perspective to the same data can produce new insights is *Women of the Forest* by Yolanda and Robert Murphy (New York, 1974). Based on field work conducted twenty years earlier in Amazonian Brazil, the authors found that by looking at the life of the Mundurucú tribe from the woman's point of view, their understanding of the actual as opposed to the official functioning of that society was much enlarged.

[4] Marriages between European traders and Indian women were contracted according to indigenous rites derived from Indian custom. For a detailed explanation, see Sylvia Van Kirk, " 'The Custom of the Country': An Examination of Fur Trade Marriage Practices" in L.H. Thomas, ed., *Essays in Western History* (Edmonton, 1976), pp. 49-70.

[5] See Murphy, *Women of the Forest*, Ch. 6 for a useful comparison. Mundurucú women actively welcomed the social change brought about by the introduction of the rubber trade into their traditional economy.

[6] An instructive study of the Indians' economic role in the fur trade is provided by Arthur Ray in *Indians in the Fur Trade* (Toronto, 1974). He shows that the Indian played a much more active, although changing role in the dynamics of the fur trade than had previously been acknowledged.

[7] H.B.C. men were prohibited from bringing women to Hudson Bay. It was not until the early nineteenth century that the first white women came to the Northwest.

[8] In 1802 H.B.C. men defended their practice of keeping Indian women in the posts by informing the London Committee that they were "Virtually your Honors Servants", H.B.C. Arch., B.239/b/79, fos. 40d-41. For a discussion of the important economic role played by native women in the fur trade, see Sylvia Van Kirk, "The Role of Women in the Fur Trade Society of the Canadian West, 1700-1850", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1975.

[9] H.B.C. Arch., Albany Journal, 24 Jan. 1771, B.3/a/63, f. 18d; "Connolly vs. Woolrich, Superior Court, 9 July 1867, *Lower Canada Jurist*, vol. XI, p. 234.

[10] Charles Bishop, "The Henley House Massacres", *The Beaver* (Autumn), 1976, p. 40.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 39. For a more technical look at the socio-economic relationship between the Indians and the traders, see the discussion of "balanced reciprocity" in Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago, 1972), Ch. 5.

[12] In this instance the Indian captain Woudby attacked Henley House because the master was keeping two of his female relatives but denying him access to the post and its provisions.

[13] Alexander Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories 1760-1776,* ed. by Jas. Bain. (Boston, 1901), p. 248.

[14] Alexander Ross, *The Fur Hunters of the Far West*, Vol. 1, (London, 1855), pp. 296-97.

[15] W. Kaye Lamb, ed., *Sixteen Years in the Indian Country: The Journal of Daniel Williams Harmon 1800-1816* (Toronto, 1957), p. 29; Toronto Public Library, George Nelson Papers, Journal 1810-11, 24 April 1811, p. 42.

[16] Elliot Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater North West: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and David Thompson 1799-1814,* (Minneapolis, 1965), pp. 71-73.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 163.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 211.

[19] For a detailed account of the story of this woman, see Sylvia Van Kirk, "Thanadelthur", *The Beaver,* (Spring), 1974, pp. 40-45.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[21] Public Archives of Canada (P.A.C.), Masson Collection, Journal of Charles Chaboillez, 13 Dec. 1797, p. 24.

[22] Nelson Papers, Journal and Reminiscences 1825-26, p. 66.

[23] Ross, *Fur Hunters*, Vol. 1, p. 296.

[24] Coues, *New Light*, p. 793; Frederick Merk, ed. *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal, 1824-25* (Cambridge, Mass., 1931), p. 104.

[25] Gabriel Franchère, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Northwest Coast of America 1811-14.* ed. R.G. Thwaites, (Cleveland, Ohio, 1904), p. 327.

[26] Van Kirk, "Thanadelthur", p. 44.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[28] W. Kaye Lamb, ed. *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie* (Cambridge, Eng., 1970), p. 152.

[29] Merk, *Fur Trade & Empire*, p. 104.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

[31] H.B.C. Arch., R. Crooks to G. Simpson, 15 March 1843, D. 5/8, f. 147.

[32] Nelson Papers, Journal 1810-11, pp. 41-42.

[33] Nelson Papers, Journal 1803-04, pp. 10-28 *passim.*

[34] Masson Collection, "An Account of the Chipwean Indians", p. 23.

[35] E.E. Rich, ed. *Simpson's Athabasca Journal and Report 1820-21* (London, H.B.R.S., v. I, 1938), p. 74.

[36] *Ibid.*, 231.

[37] H.B.C. Arch., Fort Chipewyan Journal 1820-21, B.39/a/16, fos. 6-21d. *passim*

[38] Merk, *Fur Trade and Empire*, p. 99.

[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12, 58.

[40] H.B.C. Arch., George Simpson's Journal 1821-22. D. 3/3, f. 52.

[41] Rich, *Athabasca Journal,* pp. 23-24; see also Merk, *Fur Trade & Empire,* p. 131.

[42] "Account of Chipwean Indians", pp. 23-24.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 23

[44] Ross, *Fur Hunters*, vol. 1, p. 297.

[45] Nelson Papers, Journal and Reminiscences 1825-26, p. 66. Nelson claimed that around 1780 some Indian women had warned the Canadian pedlars of impending attack because in their "tender & affectionate breast (for women are lovely all the world over) still lurked compassion for the mothers of those destined to be sacrificed."

[46] Glover, *Thompson's Narrative*, p. 45. Cf. with the Mundurucú women's desire for European goods, Murphy, *Women of the Forest*, p. 182.

[47] Samuel Hearne, *A Journey to the Northern Ocean*. edited by Richard Glover. (Toronto, 1958), p. 190.

[48] H.B.C. Arch., Albany Journal, 23 Feb. 1706, B.3/a/1, f. 28.

[49] Ross Cox, *The Columbia River.*, edited by Jane and Edgar Stewart. (Norman, Okla., 1957), p. 377.

[50] Lamb, *Journals of Mackenzie*, p. 135.

[51] A.S. Morton, *The Journal of Duncan McGillivray . . . at Fort George on the Saskatchewan 1794-95* (Toronto, 1929), p. 60.

[52] Glover, *Thompson's Narrative*, p. 106.

[53] Hearne, *Journey to Northern Ocean*, p. 35: "Women", declared the Chipewyan chief Matonabee, "were made for labour; one of them can carry, or haul, as much as two men can do."

[54] There has been a trend in recent literature to exalt the Indian woman's status by pointing out that in spite of her labour she had more independence that the pioneer farm wife, see Nancy O. Lurie, "Indian Women: A Legacy of Freedom", *The American Way*, vol. 5 (April), 1972, pp. 28-35.

[55] Morton, *McGillivray's Journal*, p. 34; L.R.F. Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, Vol I, p. 256.

[56] Murphy, *Women of the Forest*, pp. 87, 112.

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 202.

[58] Lamb, *Journals of Mackenzie*, p. 254; Glover, *Thompson's Narrative*, p. 125.

[59] Masson Collection, Journal of John Thomson. 15 Oct. 1798, p 10.

[60] J.B. Tyrrell, *Journals of Samuel Hearne and Philip Turnor 1774-92* (Toronto, Champlain Society, vol. XXI, 1934), p. 252.

[61] Michel Curot, "A Wisconsin Fur Trader's Journal 1803-04, *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, vol. 20, pp. 449, 453.

[62] Nelson Papers, Journal 1810-11, p. 41: Reminiscences, Part 5, p. 225.

[63] Cox, *Columbia River*, p. 148.

[64] Coues, *New Light*, p. 914; Ross, *Fur Hunters*, vol. 11, p. 236.

[65] Tyrrell, *Journals of Hearne and Turnor*, p. 273.

[66] H.B.C. Arch. Book of Servants Commissions, A.16/111 and 112 *passim*.

[67] Lamb, *Sixteen Years*, pp. 28-9.

[68] Masson, *Les Bourgeois*, Vol. II, p. 263.

[69] Hearne, Journey to Northern Ocean, p. 80; Williams, *Graham's Observations*, p. 158.

[70] Alexander Ross, *Adventures of the First Settlers on the Oregon or Columbia River* (London, 1849) p.p. 280-81: Glover, *Thompson's Narrative*, p. 251.

[71] John West, *The Substance of a Journal during a residence at the Red River Colony 1820-23* (London, 1827), p. 54.

[72] The traders were astonished at the little concern shown for pregnancy and childbirth in Indian society, see for example Lamb, *Journals of Mackenzie*, p. 250 and Williams, *Graham's Observations*, p. 177.

[73] John Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea 1819-22* (London, 1824), p. 86.

[74] *Ibid.*, 60. The Indian wives of Alexander Ross and Peter Filder, for example, had thirteen and fourteen children respectively.

[75] Jennifer Brown, "A Demographic Transition in the Fur Trade Country", *Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. VI, No. 1, p. 68.

[76] Cox, *Columbia River*, p. 354.

[77] J.S. Galbraith, *The Little Emperor* (Toronto, 1976), p. 68.

[78] Nelson Papers, Reminiscences, Pt. 5, p. 225.

[79] Brown, " A Demographic Transition", p. 67.

[80] Margaret MacLeod, ed. *The Letters of Letitia Hargrave* (Toronto, Champlain Society, v. XXVIII, 1947), pp. 94-95; Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement* (Minneapolis, 1957), p. 95, 192.

[81] Brown, "A Demographic Transition", p. 65.

[82] Merk, *Fur Trade and Empire*, p. 101.

[83] Williams, *Graham's Observations*, pp. 176, 178.

[84] Ross, *Adventures on the Columbia,* p. 280; W.J. Healy, *Women of Red River* (Winnipeg, 1923), pp. 163-66.

[85] Lamb, *Sixteen Years*, pp. 138, 186.

[86] Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey*, pp. 101, 106.

[87] West, *Red River Journal*, p. 16.

[88] Cox, *Columbia River*, p. 360.

[89] Hearne, *Journey to the Northern Ocean*, p. 57.

[90] Williams, *Graham's Observations*, p. 176.

[91] Thomson's Journal, 19 Nov. 1798, p. 20.

[92] Masson, *Les Bourgeois*, Vol. II, pp. 384-85. We are not told whether she also escaped being sold when the brigades arrived in the spring as the *bourgeois* intended.

[93] H.B.C. Arch., York Journal, 2 Dec. 1798, B.239/a/103, f. 14d.

[94] H.B.C. Arch., Pelican Lake Journal, 18 Jan. 1819, D.158/a/1, f. 7d.

[95] This account is derived from the Isle à la Crosse Journal, H.B.C. Arc., B.89/a/2, fos. 5-36d *passim*.

[96] Tyrrell, *Journals of Hearne and Turnor*, pp. 446n, 449.

[97] *Ibid.*, 449-50.

[98] Masson, *Les Bourgeois,* Vol. II, pp. 387-88.

[99] Lamb, *Journals of Mackenzie,* p. 255; Rich, *Athabasca Journal,* p. 388.

[100] Masson Collection, Journal of Ferdinand Wentzel, 13 Jan. 1805, p. 41.

[101] Merk, *Fur Trade & Empire*, p. 127.

[102] Nelson Papers, Journal 1810-11, pp. 41-42.

[103] W.S. Wallace, *Documents relating to the North West Company* (Toronto, Champlain Society, v. XXII, 1934), p. 211. This ruling was not enforced in outlying districts such as the Columbia. Even after the union in 1821, Governor Simpson continued to favour the formation of marital alliances in remote regions as the best way to secure friendly relations with the Indians, see Rich, *Athabasca Journal*, p. 392.

[104] For a discussion of the role played by mixed-blood women in fur trade society, see Van Kirk, "Role of Women in Fur Trade Society."